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Vera Brittain and the First World War

The Story of
Testament of Youth

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1 Provincial Young Ladyhood

1893–1914

On 7 November 1915, Vera Brittain wrote a letter to her fiancé Roland Leighton. Roland had been out in Flanders and France for seven months, serving on the Western Front with the 7th Worcestershire Regiment. Vera had been nursing as a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse at a military hospital in Camberwell for no more than a few weeks. She had seen him only once since his departure, when he returned home on leave in August, and they had become engaged.

Her overriding wish, she now admitted to Roland for the first time, was for an immediate end to the war. But she also wondered if war, and nursing the shattered bodies of the wounded and dying, had changed her irrevocably, and whether it was possible that she would ever be the same person again after ‘some of the dreadful things I have to see here’. A week earlier, the experience of assisting at an amputation dressing had seared itself on her memory. She had come away from it ‘with my hands covered in blood and my mind full of a passionate fury at the wickedness of war, and I wished that I had never been born.’

Nothing in the circumstances of Vera Brittain's background or upbringing could have prepared her for the ways in which her personal destiny would be transformed, before she had reached the age of 25, by the cataclysm of a global conflict. To Vera's generation, born in the final decade of Queen Victoria's reign, war had appeared as something remote and unimaginable: 'its monstrous destructions and distresses safely shut up', she remembered towards the end of her life, '... between the covers of history books'.

Her own future at birth had seemed comfortable, sheltered and assured. Vera Mary Brittain was born on 29 December 1893, at Atherstone House, Sidmouth Avenue, a small black and white fronted villa in Newcastle-under-Lyme, North Staffordshire. Her father was Thomas Arthur Brittain (generally known as Arthur, to distinguish him from his father and grandfather), a director of the family paper-making firm of Brittain's Limited, which operated mills at Hanley in Stoke-on-Trent (one of the novelist Arnold Bennett's 'Five Towns'), and at Cheddleton, near Leek. Among the innovations at the Brittain paper mills was the development of the thin, tough and opaque paper used by Oxford University Press in the production of its prayer books and bibles.

This manufacturing success, during the last decades of the nineteenth century, had laid the foundations of the Brittain family's wealth. When old Thomas Brittain, Arthur's grandfather and the founder of the business, died in 1894, he left behind him a vast fortune of over £100,000, though money was frequently to be the



Vera Brittain at the front window of 'Melrose', her Buxton home, in about 1912.

source of bitter legal dispute among Vera's large clan of quarrelsome Brittain uncles and aunts.

In stark contrast to the Brittain's wealth, the Bervons, the family of Vera's mother Edith, came from a background of genteel poverty. Inglis Bervon, Vera's maternal grandfather, was originally from Birmingham, but had adopted a peripatetic lifestyle as a professional singer. By the time Edith, the third of six children, two boys, four girls, was born in 1868, Inglis and Emma Bervon and their family had moved to Aberystwyth where Inglis was employed as a church organist. In the mid-1880s, he set up a successful, but scarcely lucrative, practice as a singing teacher in Hanley. One of his pupils was Arthur Brittain, who was instantly attracted to Inglis's daughter, Edith.

They were married in the spring of 1891. It was not a love match, as Edith once confided to Vera, though the marriage was to last for more than 40 years and was undoubtedly a contented union for much of that time. Arthur could be irascible and, like several of his siblings, was increasingly prone to depressive illness as he got older. However, as a young man he possessed the ambition and drive of the enterprising businessman. Edith may have been socially at a disadvantage, marrying into the middle-class respectability of the Brittain family, but she dressed well, an essential prerequisite of this newfound respectability – and something in which she would be more than emulated by her daughter, who remained fashion conscious to a high degree. Furthermore Edith showed herself more than able to create a secure and tranquil home, providing a harmonious backdrop for Vera's 'serene and uneventful' childhood.

In 1895, the Brittains moved to 'Glen Bank', a large semi-detached house on the outskirts of the Cheshire silk town of Macclesfield, and it was here that Edward Harold Brittain was born, on 30 November. From an early age, an extraordinary bond existed between Vera and her brother, not quite two years her junior. It was based on their fundamentally different temperaments. She was volatile and inclined to be outspoken, characteristics belied by her outward appearance of vulnerable prettiness (an impression accentuated by her lack of height, as she grew to only five foot three inches). Edward was much calmer and more conciliatory, always ready to pour oil on troubled waters, counselling his sister to be less headstrong and confrontational in rows with their parents. In a childhood overseen by an affectionate governess but largely devoid of the company of other children, they formed a mutual dependence, broken only by their separation when they were sent away to boarding schools.

In a strangely significant parallel, one other individual was to play a comparable role in Vera Brittain's life, providing protective sympathy with at times critical, although seemingly unlimited, understanding, and that was Winifred Holtby, in the remarkable friendship that sprang up between the two women after they met each other at Somerville College, Oxford, in 1919.

But this 'serene' home background possessed one clear drawback for the young Vera Brittain. It was unbookish and unintellectual, and from an early age she began deliberately to define herself in opposition to it. Her

father had attended school up to the age of 18, but had not gone on to university. Her mother's education had been minimal. Vera later bemoaned the fact that the shelves at 'Glen Bank' were home to precisely nine books, including several of Mrs Henry Wood's lachrymose romances, the complete poems of Longfellow and a copy of *Household Medicine*.

Her own identity, practically as soon as she could hold a pen, was confirmed as a literary one. As an adult she claimed never to remember a time when it wasn't her conscious intention to be a writer. Her governess constructed little notebooks out of waste-cuts brought home by Mr Brittain from the paper mill, and in these Vera wrote her five childhood 'novels'. The stories all bear the influence of Victorian melodrama, are set in or around Macclesfield and are full of violent deaths and self-sacrificing heroines (usually bearing her mother's name, Edith). Vera was a practised storyteller, regaling her brother Edward with bedtime stories centring on a mythological community known as 'The Dicks'.

Close as brother and sister were, the differences in the treatment meted out to them by their parents, and in the different expectations they had of them, must have made it obvious to Vera from childhood that a daughter would always be viewed as a second class citizen in comparison to a son. She loved Edward too dearly to resent him because of this, but the implication of female inferiority was one, nevertheless, that continued to rankle. At the beginning of her twenties, she recorded a conversation with her father in which she asked him if it wasn't equally important that she, like her brother, should have a career:

He answered very decidedly 'No, Edward was the one who must be given an occupation & the means to provide for himself.' The secondary sex again! It makes me feel angry that I, the more intellectual of the two, should be regarded in this light because I happen not to be a man. *But I will show them.* If Father though knowing me will not believe I have any value, *the belief will be forced upon him by facts.*

Vera may have been both more intelligent and more imaginative than her brother, as well as more forceful – an aspect of her character recognised by Arthur Brittain, when, in a backhanded compliment, he nicknamed her 'Jack' – but her evident precocity did not lead to the overturning of basic assumptions about her education and future. When she was sent away from home, it would be to 'good' schools that emphasised her family's social standing rather than demonstrated concerns about educational attainment. And in the longer term, as an attractive young woman from a well-off family, she would be expected to make a good marriage.

As a boy, Edward's position may have been more privileged, and his future taken more seriously, but to some extent he, too, was restricted by the constraints imposed by his gender. After public school and university, he would be expected to take the examinations for entry to the Indian Civil Service, or to start work in the family business. This would leave little room for the true passion of his life, his love of music. At school, he took up the violin and viola, as well as the piano and organ, and began to compose songs and short concertos. But

music would not have been regarded by either of his parents as an appropriate occupation or future career for a 'gentleman'.

In 1905, when Vera was 11, the family left Macclesfield for the spa town of Buxton, in Derbyshire. The move signalled the Brittain's social aspirations: Buxton, with its glorious new Opera House designed by Frank Matcham, its Pavilion Gardens and its elegant eighteenth-century Crescent, had an air of wealth and refinement together with a deep vein of provincial snobbery.

Additionally, Buxton possessed a number of good day schools. Edward went to one of these in preparation for his first term at Uppingham School in Rutland, where he started as a boarder in the autumn term of 1908. Uppingham was a public school especially favoured by the families of middle-class industrialists. It was well-known for its music, but was also in the vanguard of public school militarism. There was a large and well-run Officers' Training Corps, established during the South African War, which set the tone for other school activities. No boy, for instance, was allowed to take part in a sports contest, or be awarded a school prize, without first having passed a shooting test.

In 1907, following two years at Buxton's Grange School, which described itself as 'a high-class school for the daughters of gentlemen', Vera was sent to St Monica's School in Kingswood, Surrey, where one of Edith Brittain's sisters, the eldest, Florence Bervon, was co-headmistress. Aunt Florence had been a governess to a family in Stoke before setting up St Monica's in partnership with Louise Heath-Jones, who had been an

undergraduate at Newnham College, Cambridge, and a teacher at St Leonard's School in St Andrews.

St Monica's wasn't on a par with St Leonard's, nor, indeed, with still grander schools like Roedean or Benenden, and Vera only went there because of the family connection. But it was to prove a fortunate choice. Florence Bervon had neither academic qualifications nor training. She was largely responsible for administration, for teaching the girls social skills and for attracting the right kind of wealthy clientele to the school. Miss Heath-Jones, on the other hand, was much more progressive. She showed an enlightened attitude to the way certain subjects were taught, in particular history and scripture, and current events, where her pupils were given extracts from newspapers. Vera rapidly established herself at the top of the school. In her final year, lessons with a visiting mistress, Edith Fry, who encouraged her to read Carlyle, Ruskin, William Morris and modern firebrands like H. G. Wells, strengthened Vera's determination to be a writer. '[My] writing tends towards a purpose now', she recorded portentously in her diary, '- I want to write, but I will not reveal what until the time shall come'.

In a spur to Vera's developing feminism, Louise Heath-Jones introduced her to the South African feminist Olive Schreiner's pioneering work, *Woman and Labour*, not long after its publication in 1911. Schreiner's declaration of equality with men, her message to women that 'We take all labour for our province', and her accompanying plea that women be given the training 'which fits them for labour', immediately struck a chord with Vera. Furthermore, in the summer of 1911, Miss